



DREAMS, DESIRE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF PAULO COELHO'S NOVELS

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of Freudian psychoanalytic theory in selected novels of Paulo Coelho. Coelho, one of the most influential contemporary Brazilian novelists, interweaves themes of dreams, self-realization, spirituality and existential struggle with symbolic and psychological dimensions. Through an analysis of *The Alchemist*, *Brida*, *Eleven Minutes*, *Veronika Decides to Die*, *The Zahir* and *The Devil and Miss Prym*, this study examines the interplay of id, ego and superego in his protagonists, along with recurrent themes of dreams, desire, repression and self-realization. By situating Coelho's novels within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis, the paper highlights how his works not only reflect universal human struggles but also act as narratives of transformation, motivating readers toward resilience and positive thinking.

Introduction

Paulo Coelho (b. 1947, Rio de Janeiro) is celebrated as one of the most widely read authors of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His works, translated into more than eighty languages, have inspired readers across cultural, social and linguistic boundaries. Coelho's life—marked by rebellion, imprisonment, mystical experiences and pilgrimages—deeply informs his literary output. His novels, from *The Pilgrimage* to *The Alchemist* and



later works like *Veronika Decides to Die* and *Eleven Minutes*, often explore the pursuit of dreams, spirituality and the search for meaning.

Symbolism plays a central role in Coelho's narratives, functioning as an artistic tool for expressing unconscious desires, existential dilemmas and spiritual quests. When viewed through the lens of psychoanalytic criticism, Coelho's novels reveal a profound engagement with Sigmund Freud's concepts of the unconscious, id, ego, superego, repression, dreams and self-realization. This paper investigates Coelho's major works through the psychoanalytic perspective, with a focus on the interplay between psychological conflicts and spiritual awakenings.

Literature Review

Psychoanalytic literary criticism, pioneered by Sigmund Freud, interprets literature through the workings of the unconscious, dream symbolism and the tripartite psyche (id, ego, superego). Freud's theories have been widely applied to literature, ranging from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (Donnelly) to Franz Kafka's *The Hunger Artist* (Naz), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Paul) and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (Zhu and Bao).

While psychoanalysis has been extensively applied in Western literature, Paulo Coelho's works have received less attention in this framework. Existing studies largely emphasize his spiritual symbolism, mystical philosophy, or moral lessons, but a psychoanalytic reading reveals deeper dimensions of desire, repression, identity and transformation. This study contributes to filling that gap by applying Freud's model of the psyche to Coelho's characters.

This research adopts a qualitative, text-based approach. The primary sources are Coelho's novels (*The Alchemist*, *Brida*, *Veronika Decides to Die*, *Eleven Minutes*, *The Zahir* and *The Devil and Miss Prym*). Secondary sources include psychoanalytic theory, prior literary analyses and relevant scholarly works. Data was collected through close reading and thematic analysis, focusing on representations of Freud's psychoanalytic concepts.

The Alchemist: Dreams, Desire and the Tripartite Psyche



Santiago's journey embodies Freud's id (desire for treasure, love and comfort), ego (negotiation with social reality—e.g., losing his money but adapting) and superego (spiritual guidance, moral values). His dreams symbolize unconscious desires, while his eventual realization—that true treasure lies in self-discovery—demonstrates integration of psyche and spirit (Freud, *Interpretation* 147).

Brida: Fear, Love and Self-Realization

In *Brida*, psychoanalysis reveals a struggle between fear (id-driven anxieties), rational negotiation (ego) and mystical calling (superego). Her encounters with Magnus and Wicca symbolize inner psychic polarities—masculine/feminine, reason/emotion, conscious/unconscious—culminating in spiritual and psychological self-realization.

Veronika Decides to Die: Depression and Rebirth

Veronika exemplifies symptoms of psychological depression: apathy, loss of interest, indecisiveness and despair. Her suicide attempt signifies repression and hopelessness. Yet, upon believing she has only days to live, she experiences liberation—allowing her unconscious desires (love, music, self-expression) to resurface. Freud's "death drive" (Thanatos) and "life instinct" (Eros) are central to her transformation (Freud, *Ego and Id* 56).

Eleven Minutes: Sexuality and the Unconscious

Maria's journey reflects Freud's theory of sexuality and repression. Initially constrained by social taboos, she explores prostitution as a paradoxical path to freedom and self-knowledge. Her experiences reveal the duality of eros: both destructive and redemptive. Coelho portrays sexuality not merely as desire but as a pathway to wholeness—mirroring psychoanalytic interpretations of sexuality as a core human drive.

The Zahir: Obsession and the Unconscious Fixation

The narrator's fixation on Esther represents Freud's concept of obsessional neurosis. The "Zahir"—literally "the obvious"—becomes the symbol of unconscious compulsion, where repressed desire manifests as uncontrollable obsession. His existential journey parallels psychoanalytic therapy: confronting repression, integrating desire and achieving self-realization.



The Devil and Miss Prym: Good, Evil and the Moral Superego

This novel dramatizes Freud's superego conflict—the struggle between moral conscience and primal instinct. The village of Viscos becomes a microcosm of humanity, where temptation and moral choice expose the duality of human nature. Unlike his other works, Coelho offers no resolution, instead leaving the reader to grapple with Freud's idea of inner conflict between morality and instinct.

Paulo Coelho's novels, when examined through the psychoanalytic lens, reveal profound insights into the human psyche. His characters embody the tensions of id, ego and superego, while his recurrent use of dreams, journeys and symbols reflects unconscious desires and psychological conflicts. More importantly, Coelho reframes psychoanalytic struggle as a path toward spiritual self-realization, transforming repression into growth and despair into hope. Thus, Coelho bridges Freudian psychoanalysis with mystical philosophy, making his works both psychologically rich and spiritually inspiring. His novels not only entertain but also encourage readers toward resilience, positivity and the pursuit of meaning—values deeply intertwined with both psychoanalysis and literature.

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